# Online Discussions on Traffic Safety Policy: Assessment Using the Multi-step Flow Theory and Actor-network Theory Approach

*Assoc. Prof, Dr. Thi Thanh Huyen NGUYEN*
*PhD Candidate. MSc Hoang Anh NGUYEN*

***Abstract:*** *Traffic safety violations caused by alcohol use are causing serious consequences to the social life and environment in Vietnam. In 2020 alone, 6,700 people died in traffic accidents, with alcohol use being the leading reason. The Government has issued Decree No. 100/2019/ND-CP stipulating the increase of penalties for traffic safety violations related to alcohol consumption and blood/breath alcohol concentration, which has attracted public participation in discussions on online newspapers and social media. Applying the multistep flow theory and actor-network theory, the study aims to describe the role and influence of the public in shaping public opinion, as well as identify their position and influence in the network and their ability to activate information steps on online newspapers and social media. Through content analysis and in-depth interviews, the results show that public groups have actively used the media in their own ways to express their opinions, attitudes, and behaviors that influence discussion flows on traffic safety policies, contributing to the dissemination of regulations, creating positive effects on people's awareness, as well as advising on the socio-economic policy development towards the sustainable development of Vietnam's social environment.*

***Keywords:*** *public participation; policy communication; traffic environment; online newspapers; social media.*

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 Research on the participatory behaviors of the public in online media*

Technological development has changed human behavior and interaction, making them more actively involved in the online discussion environment to occupy a central position in shaping public opinion. Using online accounts, users can call on other members to participate in movements and campaigns, as well as contribute influential policy-making ideas. Millions of people around the world today are spending a large part of their life in an online world called a "second life" (Tom Boellstorff, 2008). Besides real life, there exists a virtual world built by the public, with its own online identity and culture. In this world, netizens form their own communities and participate in expressing their opinions and discussing issues of common interest, including socio-economic ones, contributing to shaping public opinion in the common space. The online space provides an opportunity for public groups within the network to voice their views on socio-

political discourse, and to discuss and share information on issues of common interest. Studying human behaviors in cyberspace is associated with the concept of participation. From the perspective of political science and media journalism, "Public participation" has been emphasized as a process by which the community's concerns, needs, interests, etc. is communicated, and the public contributes openly to the government's decision-making, based on dialogue, two-way communication and interaction with the common aim of better policy-making" (Creighton, 2005; Bleiker, 1994; Susskind, 1999). In addition, "participation" is a "public" process, in which the public uses various forms of communication to access information, express opinions, and participate in interactive discussions about socio-economic policies, thus shaping public opinion in the common space. The sharing relationship and human behaviour in cyberspace when participating in discussions have an active and positive position and influence in the network of public opinion, which has recreated a virtual social environment that shares many similarities with the real world. Also, people's participation in the media has made positive impacts on policy changes, contributing to building a more democratic and civilized social environment.

The public participation in policy discussion on the Regulation of penalties for traffic safety violations related to alcohol use in Decree 100 is one of such cases. Owing to the fact that many serious accidents had involved drivers violating the regulations on alcohol concentration in road traffic, which caused much public anger in April 2019, on June 14, 2019, the National Assembly passed the Law on Prevention and Control of Harmful Effects of Alcoholic Beverages, which notably prohibits acts of driving vehicles in road traffic with alcohol content in the blood or breath. At the end of that year, the Government continued to issue Decree No. 100/2019/ND-CP stipulating the administrative sanctioning of violations in road and railway traffic, particularly raising the penalties for acts that violate the alcohol content regulation to a much higher level than those of other traffic violations. When Decree 100 officially took effect on January 1, 2021, public discussions became livelier with mixed opinions. Apart from favourable responses of many organizations and individuals who strictly comply and contribute their opinions, there were also questions, doubts, and arguments against the implementation of the Regulation, some of which involve the alcohol concentration level, alcohol advertising on the internet, and group interests, at the same time it has created many discussions among people. Public groups initiate discussion topics in the media to promote the responsibility of each citizen, creating a positive effect in shaping people's views and behaviors to contribute to the common interest of society. By listening to people's opinions, policy-promulgating agencies have made adjustments to policies accordingly and offered more practical solutions. By March 2020, the public discussion in the media had subsided, as the public had come to agree and support Decree 100, feeling that it was useful to the prolongation of life and reduced accidents.

We find this to be a new and meaningful research direction when focusing on applying communication theories such as the multistep flow theory and the actor-network theory in understanding the role of public participation, how their opinions and behaviors affect flows of policy discussion on traffic safety in online newspapers and social media in relation to major impacts on building a safe and civilized social environment. The study seeks to help advise media/policymakers to develop the best strategies to use new media to promote public participation in policy contributions.

***1.2. Theoretical foundations on public participation in the media***

*1.2.1. The role and influence of the public on shaping public opinion from the perspective of the multistep flow theory*

We applied the multistep flow theory to understand public participation in relation to the influence model of public groups in the network according to the multistep effect, as well as the opinion, the formation of discussion topics/contents, the characteristics and behaviors of public groups in cyberspace. While previous works mainly focus on one-way communication model, for example, Harold Laswell (1948) noted the direct influence of mass media on public perception, considering the public as easily led, recent studies have emphasized the public's initiative and assertiveness in the media environment. For example, the multistep flow theory considers the public as actors that interact, modify content, spread information, and shape public opinion, instead of being passive and socially isolated as described in previous theories. Moreover, the multi-step flow theory does not assume that messages only start from a single source, which are then transferred through the mass media and have an equal impact on each individual.

The multi-step flow theory is extended from the two-step flow theory originally developed by Paul Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) in the book "The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign". Research by Lazarsfeld et al (1948) shows that personal relations have seemed to be more frequent and effective than the mass media in influencing participants' voting. According to the two-step flow theory, the effects of direct communication are hindered by social interactions and audience selectivity in exposing to, perceiving, and transforming messages. Instead of directly reaching the public, ideas broadcast by news agencies are conveyed through special actors known as key opinion leaders (KOLs). The research confirms the decisive importance of KOLs in the network to the shaping of personal opinion. Then, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) further studied the influence on the communication relationship between individuals and the mass media, especially the role of key individuals KOLs in receiving, interpreting and disseminating media messages to the general public.

However, after a few decades, the two-step flow theory had to be adapted to the context. Bennett & Manheim (2006) showed that the internet and mobile devices have made it easier for the public to directly access and disseminate media content. As a result, scholars pointed out that the top-down linear model proposed by Lazarsfeld

and Katz is oversimplifying interpersonal influence, as well as underestimating the influence of the mass media. According to Weimann (1982), the flow of ideas from the mass media to individuals is found to be more complex than the theory predicts. Key drivers missing in the original model include the information exchange between KOLs and exchange between the "minority" public groups with less participation. Also, the influences do not disappear after two steps, as opinion leaders can communicate ideas to followers, who will spread these ideas to other individuals. Brosius and Weimann (1996) also show new models that calculate complex patterns of the multi-step flow, which allow the audience to act from the bottom up, supporting the delivery of news topics and the dissemination of information for the media.

Based on previous studies, Ognyanova and Monge (2013) conducted a study on the relationship and influence between public groups in a multi-perspective network using a multi-step communication approach. Then, Ognyanova (2017) described the position and influence of public groups on the media flow according to the multistep flow paradigm. The findings motivated us to focus on studying the participation and the influence of different public groups, including news editorial boards, administrators of social media pages/groups, KOLs, and the general public, on discussion flows, such as the formation of topic/discussion content, the shaping of public opinion, and opinions of other members in cyberspace.

*1.2.2. The position and relationship between members in the social environment from the perspective of the actor-network theory*

To understand the sharing relationships between actors in the public opinion network as well as to determine the strategic positions, relationships and influence of public groups, we applied the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in the study of public participation. ANT was derived from the work of French scholar Bruno Latour (1987), then, a more complete theoretical framework applied in sociological and communication research was developed by researchers in the same field, typically Michel Callon (1986), John Lawand John Hassard (1999). Teurlings (2013) explained the concept of Actor-network derives from the core idea that all existing phenomena are composed of actors operating in the network. These actors can be humans (individuals, groups, or communities) or non-humans (technology, knowledge, etc.) that have a dialectical relationship with each other. ANT has been applied in many communication studies such as the network centrality (Freeman, 1979) and media from an ANT perspective (Teurlings, 2013). Developing from this perspective, Freeman (1979) shows how to measure the influence of certain public groups (referred to as special actors) on other members of the network based on their favourable central position as well as their connection relationship in the network with respect to three factors: (1) Degree centrality; (2) Closeness centrality, and (3) Betweenness centrality. Also, Granovetter (1973), Freeman (1979) và Teurlings (2013) analyze the influence of actors in a network-based not only on position but also on the relationship between actors according to the cohesion of the relationship, bond and power. It can be seen that stemming from

public interests, recent approaches to communication research view the audience as active participants, promote active interaction of the public as actors that motivate and control the communication process, having a more equal role in the power position in relation to the media.

Based on the above-mentioned theoretical basis of communication, we chose to survey the public discussion on the Regulation on increasing penalties for traffic safety violations related to alcohol concentration in Decree No. 100/ 2019/ ND-CP, taking place between April 23, 2019 and March 16, 2020 on a number of typical online newspapers and Facebook pages to examine the relationship and influence of some special public groups in promoting discussion flows, spreading information, and shaping public opinion and members' viewpoints in the social environment, thereby proposing solutions to improve the effectiveness of public participation in the media in socio-economic policy consultancy.

Based on the framework of the multistep flow theory and ANT, this study applies content analysis and in-depth interviews to understand the position, role, and influence of actors in shaping public opinion during the discussion. We identified three main actors, including: the media administrator (online news editors of VnExpress, Tuoi Tre Online, Vietnamnet, and their respective Facebook pages; admins of the Facebook group of Vietnam's automobile and motorcycle community (Otofun); Experts/KOLs (their personal pages that attract the most interaction and comments), and the general public actors (readers, social media users, and members of online pages/groups).

**2. Method**

Specifically, the study applies the in-depth interview method with online news editorial boards and Facebook page administrators, together with content analysis of news articles, posts, and comments about Decree 100 on the surveyed online newspapers and social media (including 303 new articles and 18,600 comments posted on VnExpress, Tuoitre Online, Vietnamnet and their respective pages, and 190 posts and 12,424 comments on Otofun social page), observed from April 23, 2019 to March 16, 2020, using framing criteria (Entman, 1991; Olasunkanmi Arowolo, 2017) to identify prominent topics discussed by the public and understand the role and influence of these public groups on the flow of discussion in the media network. We also inherit the results of content analysis published in our previous studies (Huyen & Anh, 2018) to classify the messages in 31,024 comments posted by online news readers and social media users in order to understand the contributions of the general public to shaping public opinion, using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method involves collecting comments, encoding each sentence, label themes to describe the encoded content and compare with other sentences, thus identifying themes that emerge from the text (Cho & De Moya, 2014). Specifically, we divided the samples into two separate parts and assigned the coding task to two programmers. They then encode the comments according to the topic list and determine their tone. After the encoding

was completed, we analyzed the collected comments, categorised them into a list of 11 topics, and grouped into seven types of message.

Finally, the study uses the method of observing the information spread by individuals/groups and in-depth interviews with seven people, including five managing editors in charge of readers of VnExpress, Tuoitre Online, and Vietnamnet, one administrator of 'Otofun', and one KOL who is a politician. In-depth interviews with these public groups with 8 questions were conducted to find out the following key issues: 1) The roles, attitudes, initiative, behaviors and influence of different public groups on discussion flows through the way they manage communication channels, organize discussion content for the public on online newspapers and social media to bring about policy changes to reach a consensus from the people; 2) The reasons why they actively participate in calling on people to discuss traffic safety policies and respond to the "No drink and drive" campaign, thereby supporting to answer questions and form opinions in discussions on online newspapers and social media. All these interviews are recorded in audio or written form.

**3. Results**

Applying the above communication theories, we have come to describe the position and influence of public groups on discussion flows in a multi-perspective network on online newspapers and social media, regarding the regulation on increasing the penalties for alcohol content violations in Decree 100/2019/ND-CP. The results show that public groups have their own roles, views, active participation and influence levels, contributing to policy consultancy, creating positive effects on members' perception in the social environment as follows:

***The position and influence of the online newspaper editorial board/ Facebook page administrator***

In-depth interviews with the surveyed online newspaper editorial boards and Facebook page administrators show that this group is always interested in finding and methodically updating information flows about the anti-drink-driving movement from public opinion flows and people's opinions on the Regulation on penalties for traffic safety violations related to alcohol use to attract the public to participate in the discussion:

*"Readers' comments about the series of published articles on Decree 100 sent to the editorial office are collected and categorised into two versions per day. A portion of valuable readers' opinions will be processed, edited and approved for publication in all online publications. Taking advantage of data sources from readers' discussion and opinion flows, the editorial board enrich the content of news topics, initiate life-related discussion topics by selectively publishing hot issues of public concern, promoting public participation in discussion, thereby creating positive effects in policy communication".*

Combining in-depth interviews and content analysis, encoding and categorizing 303 news articles and 18,600 comments published on newspapers and their fanpages,

190 posts and 12,424 comments on the 'Otofun' page according to Entman's framing criteria (1991), the results show that these posts and comments are divided into five prominent topic groups in relation to the surveyed issue as follows:

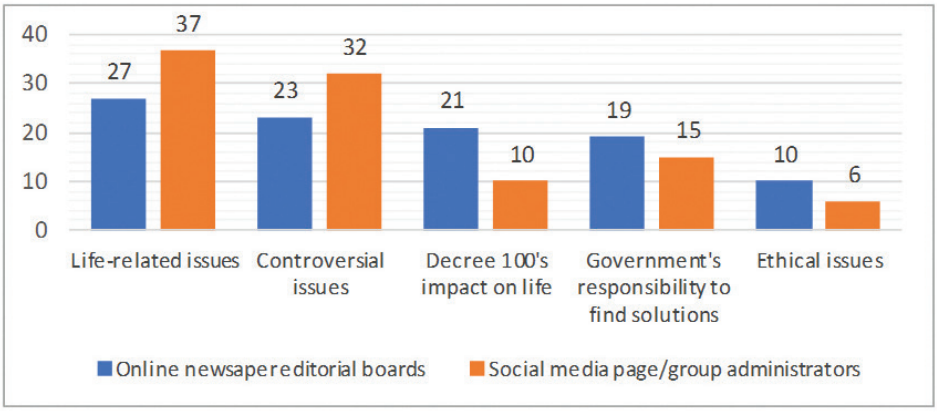



Figure 1: The rate of readers' discussion initiated by administrators of VnExpress, Vietnamnet, Tuoi Tre Online, and their respective pages, and Otofun page between April 23, 2019 and March 16, 2020 (per cent) (*Source: Author Field survey*)

Figure 1 shows that, in the surveyed online newspapers, the topic group "life-related issues" accounts for most of the discussion content (27%), illustrating aspects such as drinking culture, the penalty's economical level, or people's stories, such as the difficult background of a poor female worker who was fatally hit by a drunk driver on Lang Street, or an unfortunate victim killed by a Mercedes in Kim Lien tunnel (Hanoi). Next are controversial topics during the sanctioning of traffic safety violations related to alcohol use (23%), such as alcohol advertising on the internet, eating fruit or drinking syrups containing alcohol, or whether people walking drunk could be fined. Topics on the impact of Decree 100 on people's lives attract public participation in discussion at the third position (21%). Articles on this topic show their effectiveness that follows the official implementation of Decree 100 and the Law on prevention and control of harmful effects of alcoholic beverages (focusing on issues of public concern such as the declining number of people hospitalized due to alcohol-related traffic accidents, a more peaceful Tet holiday thanks to alcohol concentration fines, deserted pubs with lost revenue following Decree 100, etc.). The online newspaper public is also interested in the topic of the government's responsibility to find solutions (19%), in which the government and ministries coordinated with relevant parties to listen and exchange information through media channels, clarify and resolve people's concerns, provide strong and timely measures and actions so that people trust, support and abide by the Regulation. Ethical issues also account for 10% of the public's discussion on online newspapers, involving conflicts, violations of law and ethics while implementing the Regulation, for example, a driver with 'blue'

license plate cursing and slapping a traffic police officer when being asked for an alcohol test, setting up groups revealing alcohol concentration measuring spots, "Head of the Traffic Police Department: Stopping drivers violating the alcohol concentration next to the beer pub is very offensive", and many drivers calling for help when violating the alcohol concentration.

Regarding social media pages, the in-depth interview with the administrator of the automobile and motorcycle community "Otofun" shows that they have their own way of organising and leading the public's discussion flows, with indirect, accessible messages close to the public interest:

*"Instead of just informing the laws, Otofun focuses on indirect communication, giving factual information about accidents or penalties related to alcohol violations, helping readers see the consequences of traffic violations. This method is quite effective, as forum members participate more in discussions, thereby making the content more diverse and attractive, allowing the message of Decree 100 to be integrated naturally and practically to the community and helping them find the forum helpful."*

(Representative of Otofun forum administrator)

According to the results of the survey on news topics on the social media pages of the 91-94 high school group and the Otofun community, it can be seen that the administrators had initiated and published articles that attract and call on people to actively respond to the 'No Drink Driving' Movement, as well as to express contributive opinions to Decree 100. The topic group that social media users are most interested in are life-related issues (37%), similar to the level of discussion among online newspaper readers. After Decree 100 officially took effect on January 1, 2019, common news topics related to the alcohol culture, levels of fines, post-drinking shuttle service, etc. were discussed more by Otofun members than other topic groups. Novel information and prominent discussion topics on this page were re-published by the press such as a driver receiving a 7 million VND fine for 'drinking a cup of medicinal liquor' on VnExpress, or the first wedding in Binh Phuoc serving 40 tables without a bottle of beer and alcohol on Vietnamnet. Controversial issues also attract discussion among social media users on Otofun (32%), similar to that of online newspapers. These issues include people's questions about the absurdity of the regulation on fines of zero alcohol concentration, or whether those driving a bicycle could be fined for alcohol level. The next topics that interest users to discuss are the government's responsibility (15%), the impact of Decree 100 on people's lives (10%), and ethical issues (6%).

Upon comparing survey results on online newspapers and social networks, there are similarities in the news topics that attract the participation in discussion of readers and social media users. In particular, it can be seen that novel topics that are heavily discussed and shared by users on many social media pages/groups have been used by the news editorial board to expand the source of news topics on major online newspapers. Especially, the online news editorial board and social media administrators focus on exploiting the articles showing the conflict between

the old and new beliefs, between the deeply rooted alcohol culture into Vietnamese people's lives and safe traffic practices, in order to stimulate interaction and engage the public in discussion on the Regulation on penalties for traffic safety violations related to alcohol use. Therefore, topics showing the consequences caused by alcohol on the lives of innocent victims of accidents have caused discontent, sympathy and compassion among many people. The survey results also show that the online news editorial board and the social media administrators have demonstrated their role and influence on the public's discussion flows about traffic safety policy by initiating topics, consulting experts and managers, participating in publishing and solving public problems, and receiving great support from the people.

***The position and influence of KOLs***

In communicating traffic safety policy, the participation of key opinion leaders (KOLs) plays an important role, influencing discussion flows of members in the social environment. Key opinion leaders are special actors located in a strategic position that acts as the necessary bridge in the process of transmitting information between online newspaper administrators, social media and the general public. They are influential individuals in a particular field, and because of their special positions, they are often separated to examine and decode messages and how ideas are disseminated and shared. The participation in discussions of KOLs who are politicians, national assembly deputies, journalists, lawyers, medical experts, etc., has the ability to initiate, lead, form opinions and direct public opinion.

For example, during the peak period of critique (June 1, 2019 - January 1, 2020), the draft regulation continuously encountered the public's mixed opinions due to information insufficiently reported in online newspapers. Some controversial topics published in newspapers, such as "206 deputies opposed the "no drink driving" regulation", "businesses lobbying historians to lobby for alcohol businesses", caused misunderstanding, creating a wave of fierce criticism from the public. On June 4, 2019, the press headline "The National Assembly does not agree with the "no drink driving" option" without a clear and thorough explanation, encountered strong criticisms from social media users. Many people suspected that the deputies had been bribed by group interests. On the same day, Assoc. Prof. Dr., and National Assembly deputy, Nguyen Lan Hieu, spoke up by posting the article "The National Assembly and alcohol" in the 'Perspectives' section of VnExpress, in which he explained that all delegates supported 'no drink driving', but they were still concerned about the permissible limit of alcohol concentration in a driver's breath of 0 milligram per litre of air. Previously, lawyer Le Nguyen Duy Hau published an article that shared the same opinion with Mr. Nguyen Lan Hieu, titled "Not true – the National Assembly does not support drink driving", which shows clear arguments about legislative activities, so that the people could understand and stay calm instead of criticising the National Assembly. These articles were shared and discussed enthusiastically, as well as became the prominent news topic of many major newspapers. Applying the multistep flow theory and the

actor-network theory, it can be seen that National Assembly member Nguyen Lan Hieu and lawyer Le Nguyen Duy Hau promoted their influence in persuading and forming the public views because they are reputable and representative experts with in-depth medical and legal expertise. Because of their central position in the network, they become special actors with sufficient scientific and practical background to clear up the public's doubts and misunderstandings, somewhat changing the public opinion at that time.

At the same time, on social media, many KOLs showed their influence on the public's discussion flows about the Regulation by simultaneously speaking out and creating communication networks on online newspapers. In particular, content analysis results show that the representative of the National Traffic Safety Committee, is one of the KOLs who actively participated in the Otofun forum, shared views and answered questions, easing public controversy surrounding this new Decree. These posts on social media attracted discussion and support from a large number of people. For example, on January 23, 2020, the post with answers related to alcohol concentration violations attracted the highest interaction on the Otofun group (568 comments, 852 likes). The representative of the National Traffic Safety Committee's post was shared and commented by many social media users, contributing to forming the right opinion in them, emphasizing that "Decree 100 neither penalizes the sober nor does the drunk! It only penalises the driver with "alcohol found in the breath or blood".

Although many support that Decree 100 is "civilized", "progressive", "brings many benefits to society", many argue that the current level of fines for alcohol concentration of zero is absurd, compared with the minimum applicable in many countries around the world.

On the "Otofun" social page, the representative of the National Traffic Safety Committee listened to opinions and explained to people clearly the purpose of the Regulation on penalties for traffic safety violations related to alcohol use, that "*the blood alcohol level of zero acts as a deterrent, a form of education. Decree 100 issued by the government is not only to fine people, but seeks to raise people's awareness of not using alcohol when participating in traffic, for the safety of themselves and the social community*."

The results of our in-depth interview with the representative of the National Traffic Safety Committee, explain why the statements and discussion contents contributed to directing public opinion, created support, and spread strongly among the public. *"When speaking in the press and on social media, I do not think of myself as a person who directs public opinion or has great influence, rather I am just a civil servant working in the traffic field, a citizen who believes in correct regulations that benefits everyone. The statements I make are based on accuracy, accessibility, friendliness, and the message must be sufficient, not sensational or shock the public, so that anyone when reading my posts can properly understand the thoughts and goals I want to convey"*

(The representative of the National Traffic Safety Committee)

The results of in-depth interview also suggest that the representative of the National Traffic Safety Committee is selective in the contents of the messages this person shares on online newspapers and social media, making them accessible, focusing on protecting safety and lives for road users in particular and the whole society in general, which have a sufficiently strong warning effect, acting as a deterrent, while remaining humane, determined to help people adjust their behaviour and avoid violations, thereby gaining consensus and contributing to shaping the general public opinion, correctly comprehending the Regulations on penalties for traffic safety violations related to alcohol use.

Through analysing the aforementioned cases as well as analysing research findings, we find that KOLs, such as the representative of the National Traffic Safety Committee, lawyer Le Nguyen Duy Hau, and National Assembly deputy, Doctor Nguyen Lan Hieu, are special actors with the function of influencing and mediating in spreading powerful messages in the network. The reason is that they represent elite groups and relevant parties that have the ability to connect and mobilize a large network of participants to support. Also, these KOLs have the ability to interpret messages and opinions, and have their own behavioural culture to shape public perception and opinion around them.

***The position and influence of the general public***

In the network structure, the general public is affected by messages from online newspaper editorial boards and social media administrators, but they themselves actively participate in discussions and play an important role, holding central positions in spreading information, promoting interaction, and shaping public opinion. The general public can actively participate in discussions in groups of topics, contribute ideas, and contribute to spreading information quickly and strongly to actors closely connected to them in the network.

Using content analysis of the posts and comments on Decree 100 by the surveyed online newspaper readers and social media users, we found seven common types of comments made by the general public as follows:

| No | Comment type | Online newspapers (%) | Social media (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Advocacy | 30 | 16 |
| 2 | Advisory | 14 | 13 |
| 3 | Grievance | 11 | 10 |
| 4 | Inquiries | 10 | 12 |
| 5 | Call to action | 9 | 5 |
| 6 | Emotion | 6 | 19 |
| 7 | Information provision | 5 | 23 |
| 8 | Others | 15 | 2 |

Table 2: The proportion of comments in relation to type among readers of three online newspapers,and"Otofun" social page from April 23, 2019 to March 16,2020 (Dimensions refer from Cho & De Moya, 2014; Huyen & Anh, 2018)

The survey results show that online newspaper readers expressing 'advocacy' comments account for the highest percentage (30%). However, quite a few comments discuss "other issues" (15%), apart from topics aimed by the press, such as food safety, environmental sanitation, or attacking and judgemental comments found in the discussion. 'Advisory' comments rank third at 14%, which share suggestions and advice, or propose solutions to managing alcohol use for the government. A considerable 11% of 'grievance' comments criticized the government's actions, doubting their purpose and the authenticity of the information published by the press. 'Inquiries' comments make up 10%, asking for answers from the government. 'Call to action' comments constitute 9%, aiming at connecting other members to act together to reduce traffic accidents through behavior change, while 6% is for the 'emotion' category, which shows concern and painful feelings in tragic accidents, and care about community interests. Only 5% of comments 'provide information', which update information about other countries' laws, and the pros and cons of alcohol use.

In contrast to online newspapers, comments of 'information provision' account for the largest proportion on social media (23%). Similarly, many 'emotional' comments are given by social media users (19%). At the same time, up to 16% of public comments express agreement with Decree 100 and acknowledge its practical benefits and impact on life. Next are 'advisory' (13%), 'Inquiries' (12%), 'grievance' ones (10%) which include personal attacks and questions about Decree 100, and 'call to action' (5%). There are few comments on 'other issues' (2%) which are not related to the contents aimed by the social media administrator.

The survey results also show that many opinions in discussions have become a source of news for the press, shaping public opinion, as well as advising the government how to implement Decree 100 seriously and effectively, for example, the articles "Is sweeping the road or dredging channels as the penalty for drunk drivers strong enough as a deterrent?" (May 11, 2019) on Tuoi Tre Online, "Considering alcohol and beer as a national cultural trait is a fallacy" published on VnExpress (June 4, 2019), or a summary of opinions showing "101 word-of-mouth ways to 'dodge' the alcohol concentration test" on Vietnamnet (January 5, 2020). In addition, some online newspaper reader groups and social media users always want to dissociate and discuss issues other than the topics the press directs them to. Readers/audience are easily dispersed and expand their network to other groups on social media. In private groups on social media, some social media users become bridges, easily transferring information from one group to another, from personal accounts to groups and vice versa, and from the fan page to groups and vice versa. To find out which user actors have the ability to spread and promote other group members' participation, we conducted a survey on the posts that attracted the most discussion and interaction in the Otofun group.

One notable finding of the study is that some active social media users in the marginal group play the role of transferring "strange" information between groups. For example, the account N.T.V.A. - a member of the Otofun group who played the role of intermediary when transferring information from 'Hóng Express' to the Otofun group, with the content "Male student sobs over a 7 million dong fine: This Tet, I'll come home with no money", and a further commentary titled "That's it for Tet". The post attracted discussion of many group members, with 490 comments, 51 shares and 2,300 likes. This social media user also becomes a bridging point of information transfer between different independent network clusters. It can be seen that social media have created favourable conditions for actors to create their own networks, and also to be able to interpret and transfer information inside and outside the network.

From the results of content analysis, we also found that some social media users have the function of navigating information and forming opinions as special actors. For example, during the adjustment period (January 4, 2020 - February 15, 2020), after the Law on Prevention of the Harmful Effects of Alcohol and Decree 100 was put into effect, apart from the support of organizations and individuals who strictly abide by the law and spread good messages, there were acts of defiance, cynicism, and doubts about the implementation of the laws, and questions from the public about the penalty level, populists and group interests to increase budget revenue and income for traffic police officers. Some opposing groups set up their own closed groups and networks, for example, in Da Nang, some Facebook groups were created under the name "Updates on the alcohol concentration checkpoints in Da Nang", which provide 24/7 updates on traffic police checkpoints sanctioning traffic safety violations, or "Da Nang alcohol concentration checkpoints". Although these groups had only been established for two days, some already attracted more than 3,000 members. Updated schedules and locations of traffic police's checkpoints were continuously informed in detail. Many "drinkers" even asked in advance where the checkpoints were before going to drink, and received enthusiastic responses from members. It can be seen that some traffic participants' ways to solve the problem in Vietnam have become more creative, formed by the sharing of the online community. However, this is the act of abetting violations because pointing out checkpoints is similar to cheating the laws when drink & drive people avoid being checked. According to the ANT theory, when a series of "strange" information was transferred between groups and pages, account V.T.T. on Otofun immediately called for the need to immediately stop the act of avoiding alcohol concentration check and sharing how to do it. V.T.T called for *"being civilized by not drinking & driving. In the city, take a taxi, motorbike taxi, or have someone in the group agree not to drink to drive others home."* This is one of our findings showing that shows that the technological development has changed the general public's interaction behaviours to be more proactive in the media environment. People

can participate in online discussions and hold central positions that positively influence the dissemination of information and the shaping of public opinion.

**4. Discussion and Conclusion**

***4.1. Discussion***

When assessing the role, opinion and active participation in discussion among public groups on online newspapers and social media presented in the findings, we find that each public group has its own position, role, participatory behaviour and level of influence to make positive contributions to promoting members' discussion flows on policy-making to build a better social environment. Of these groups, *(1) The online news editorial board and the social media administrator* hold a powerful central position in disseminating information, thus having the advantage in leading and organising the content and creating multi-perspective discussion topics that attract public interaction. The relationship between online newspapers and social media is a symbiotic relationship of cooperation and mutual complementarity. While social media administrators have the advantage of a large network of followers and the ability to spread information quickly, the online news editorial board, thanks to its legitimacy, has the advantage in leading public opinion through the opinions of experts, managers, and elected deputies. The results of in-depth interviews show that journalists and Otofun social media administrators realise the importance of policy communication, which requires attention to the discussion comment of the public. However, upon comparing the public's comments on online newspapers and social media, it is shown that the public is easily dispersed when discussing many issues other than the topics aimed by the newspaper, and easily splits up to form their own network in other spaces such as closed groups on social media.. For this reason, journalists and social media administrators tend to focus on updating discussion threads and valuable opinions from the public and KOLs in gaining attention, creating discussion environments and directing public opinion in order to disseminate policies more clearly and accessibly, as well as gain public consensus. *(2) Key opinion leaders (KOLs)* hold a prominent central position, convenient in creating, disseminating, guiding information, answering questions, which has significant influence on shaping public opinion. Special actors such as the representative of the National Traffic Safety Committee, lawyer Le Nguyen Duy Hau, and National Assembly deputy - Doctor Nguyen Lan Hieu, play important roles in guiding and answering readers' questions, and at the same time forming views and shaping public opinion in the networks they create. In particular, KOLs initiated discussion topics on social media that promote each citizen's responsibility and a sense of belonging to a broader community, in which each person's behaviour will contribute to the common interests of society. However, from the results of content analysis of topics that attract discussion published in the press, we realise that some state authority representatives made unclear and incomplete statements in the press and social media, which created conflicting opinions from the public, causing controversy

surrounding the policy. *(3) The general public* has an important position in providing information, especially influencing the formation of public opinion through sharing ideas, spreading information quickly and strongly to other members in the network.

Nevertheless, through the results of content analysis and observation of online discussion on online newspapers and social media, we find that sometimes, some discussions in online newspapers were led by the crowd psychology, ran after the trend under the pulling power of some public groups in the network. For example, "initiative" groups set up groups that locate alcohol concentration checkpoints; drinking people show how to "co-exist" with Decree 100, which attracted a portion of people with limited information and insufficient knowledge to participate. In addition, there existed personal attacks or sophistry, isolation and the defeat of different opinions and views. At the climax when the press made headlines without clearly explaining the draft law on prevention and control of harmful effects of alcohol, the online community accused many National Assembly deputies of not supporting the plan to ban drinking & driving and of having "group interests". In subsequent stages, such keywords as "alcohol enterprises lobbying for policies" or "traffic police not transparent in sanctioning" created mixed public opinions on traffic safety policy. Also, the general public and KOLs had not yet been effectively utilised by the online news editorial board.

Based on the analysed results, the study's main findings show that media management agencies and newsrooms have not developed the most effective public engagement strategies. Therefore, to motivate members in the social environment to participate in contributing to better policy-making, media management agencies and online newspapers, *first*, need to create an environment that encourages them to participate in discussion on the newspapers' pages and their social media channels. To be specific, the online newspaper and social media administrator needs to grasp hot issues of public concern to create articles and connect other actors such as KOLs and the general public to participate in discussions. Online newspapers also need to determine the position and influence of KOLs with good expertise, opinions, and communication capacity to hold a key position in expressing opinions in order to shape and lead discussion flows of the general public. *Second*, build a multi-channel, multi-relationship approach strategy to enhance information spread and promote interaction with the public. *Third*, online newspapers can select and use quality posts and discussions of engaging readers or social media users to develop into multi-perspective discussion articles on online newspapers and social networks in order to expand the communication network through the set of followers of those whose comments are posted. At the same time, develop a strategy for selecting and sharing message contents on the media based on the issues of individual people associated with the interests of the community and society. *Fourth*, online newspapers should build a culture of discussion in newspapers and publish these principles of participation based on

criteria such as lawfulness, civility, openness, friendliness, equality, and respect. Especially, it is necessary to strengthen research on actors in the media network on online newspapers and social media in order to promote their advantages and influence in the discussion flows of policy and social issues.

***4.2. Conclusion***

The research findings show that using the multi-step flow theory and actor-network flow theory has clarified public groups' discussion flows in the network regarding policies on online newspapers and social media, as well as existing problems in order to build a safer traffic environment. The highlight of this study shows the position, role, contribution and influence of different public groups when promoting discussion flows on online newspapers and social media, with the final result being the people's consensus in favour of Decree 100, as they feel that the traffic safety policy is really necessary and meaningful in life. This research direction suggests agencies and organizations can gain a deeper understanding of people's behaviour when participating in consulting and contributing to policy-making in the social environment, thereby proposing better media management strategies when promulgating policies and decisions that can affect the socio-economic development, gaining people's understanding and consensus. In addition, the findings suggest future research directions on human behaviour and interaction with the social environment through communication in cyberspace based on deep understanding of human behaviour and influence from the mult-step flow theory approach according to the network effect. As for these factors, more extensive studies on participation are necessary to propose effective strategies to improve public participation, not only contributing to good social governance, building a more lawful, civilized, open and friendly social environment, but also enhancing the promotion of a culture of responsible behaviour and participation in cyberspace.

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